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COORDINATION OF THE POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER BODIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING THEMES:

(a) COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: EMERGENCY RELIEF AND THE CONTINUUM TO REHABILITATION AND DEVELOPMENT;

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies** a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, category I

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 23 and 24 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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* E/1993/100.

** Formerly known as League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Disasters, Vulnerability And Human Rights.

Disasters and vulnerability

The Loma Prieta earthquake that struck California in 1989 was of almost exactly the same strength as that which struck Erzincan in Turkey in 1992. Both hit densely-populated areas. In Turkey, 547 died and more than 100,000 were made homeless, while 65 people were killed in California.

Clearly, there is often very little that can be done to prevent drought, floods, hurricanes or earthquakes, but we can all, from governments, aid agencies and communities to families and individuals, mitigate their effects.

Epidemics are among the most preventable disasters. Sanitation and safe drinking water have a dramatic impact on water-borne disease. Surveillance monitors the health of individuals and communities, alerting them to risks. Mass immunisation not only reduces vulnerability when other disease pre-conditions exist, but it helped eradicate smallpox, for example, which caused devastating epidemics throughout history until it was finally eliminated in 1977.

Preventing disasters requires actions which reduce people's vulnerabilities to natural events and diminish the effects of those events. Such actions require the political will and economic means to make them work. In many disaster-prone countries, the poor and the vulnerable who are potential disaster victims exercise little political power, and thus have less possibility to claim fundamental human rights., or to persuade governments to invest in their future.

Research into successful famine mitigation shows that famines are most effectively tackled by countries with democratic institutions, from a free press to open political systems, which lead to the creation of safety nets for the most vulnerable, land reforms and literacy to reduce future vulnerability, and enhance their human rights and dignity.

Although there is very little that can be done to prevent extreme natural events, there is a great deal that can be done to reduce their effects and to render people less vulnerable.

As a first step in this process aid agencies must confront the basic causes of vulnerability.

Identifying vulnerabilities

We all know that some people are more likely to be affected by a hazard than others even though they are exposed to the same event. Even where a whole community lives in an earthquake zone or is threatened by a health hazard such as cholera, certain groups will be at a higher risk than others.

There are three basic characteristics that make some groups more vulnerable than others. These are:

- **Proximity/Exposure:** People who live or work near some kind of hazard are more vulnerable than those who don't (E.g. on a flood plain, near a nuclear reactor, etc.). Certain people are more exposed to AIDS than others (E.g.: in certain parts of the world, people without access to information or protection, people who cannot control their sexual partners, etc.).

- **Poverty:** People who have few options, few resources and few reserves can be pushed over the "edge" of survival more easily than those who are wealthier. Poverty is linked to other resources such as education. Children of poor families are far less likely to enter and complete school than children of families who are better off. Where education provides a reserve or opens options for economic activity, poor people will often be disadvantaged.

- **Exclusion/Marginalization:** People who are left out of economic and social systems are vulnerable. For example, people who are excluded from access to education, health care, employment, housing, credit, political participation, etc. are not able to manage and control their lives and the decisions and events that affect them as much as those who do have access to all of these resources. People are excluded and marginalised for a number of reasons. For example, prejudice and discrimination against people of a certain class, ethnic group, religion, race or other group effectively marginalises them and makes them vulnerable. In some societies people who have physical or mental handicaps are effectively excluded from many economic and social functions. Sometimes, social custom and roles result in exclusion or marginalisation of certain groups such as women and children who may, in some societies, have limited access to resources and opportunities.

These examples point out not only who might be vulnerable but also why they are vulnerable. There is, sometimes, a tendency among the humanitarian organisations to address only the question of who in their programme design by referring to generic groups of people as *the most vulnerable* such as women, children, the elderly, the poor or the marginalised. This focus only on who are vulnerable can lead to inappropriate responses. Evacuating women and children separately after earthquakes, floods or wars often result in psychological and social problems. Providing only for the refugees where the host communities also lack similar services creates

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additional treats for the target groups. Moving the poor to safer areas can reduce one form of risk but by limiting their access to income sources often controlled by the rich, more serious risks may arise. All disaster response programmes need to address the question why as well as who is vulnerable.

Often what manifests as vulnerability at a particular time, such as to disasters, is a symptom of much more deep rooted causes, such as lack of access to resources (economic/material vulnerability), disintegration of social patterns (social vulnerability), degradation of the environment and inability to protect it (ecological vulnerability), lack of strong national and local institutional structures (organisational vulnerability), lack of access to information and knowledge (educational vulnerability), lack of public awareness (attitudinal/motivational vulnerability) limited access to political power and representation (political vulnerability), certain beliefs and customs (cultural vulnerability).

Disasters and human rights

The increasing complexity of disasters and the blurring of the distinction between man-made and natural disasters forces should focus attention on the prime causes of vulnerability to disaster. Be it famines or earthquakes, Africa or Europe, there is a close correlation between disaster vulnerability and people's ability to claim their basic human rights.

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the right to life, liberty and the security of person.

Article 25 states that we all have the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of ourselves and our family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond our control.

What is at issue is not whether governments are promoting these rights, but whether people and communities are able to claim them effectively, and have a realistic expectation that their government will be able to turn that claim into action.

Shanty town dwellers are vulnerable to epidemics because of the poor environment in which they are forced to live and their lack of access to health services. Farmers caught up in the complex disaster of civil war, economic dislocation and famine are vulnerable because they cannot claim their right to "liberty and the security of person". Landless labourers living on the flood plain of Bangladesh are unable to claim their right to a "standard of-living adequate for health and well-being". When disaster hits, their location puts them more at risk of dying. If they survive, their lack of ability to claim their human rights means they have less capacity to recover from the disaster and hence are more vulnerable to the effects of the next round of flooding.

The essence of reducing disaster vulnerability and responding effectively in disaster relief lies in the effective implementation of human rights. Disasters seek out those least able to claim their basic rights. The process is pernicious since disaster vulnerability further reduces the practice of basic human rights.

The implementation of human rights is also a key issue in disaster relief and rehabilitation.

In disaster relief, the Federation believes that the fundamental concern of mankind and of the international community should be the protection and welfare of the individual and the safeguarding of basic human rights.

If there is a duty to bring relief to all disaster victims, regardless of nationality, race, religion, social position or political opinion, then receiving aid without discrimination, and based on needs alone, is a fundamental human right. Aid agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, play a key role in ensuring that these rights are exercised.

Just as government voluntarily accept obligations to protect the victims of armed conflicts, so they should accept obligations towards victims of disasters. It is also incumbent upon the aid agencies, both national and international, to assist disaster victims in claiming their right to receive assistance speedily, recognising that the duty to expedite international relief rests firstly with the affected government.

In India today, famine victims possess the "social capacity" of the right to claim government famine relief. It is this ability to claim relief which has largely eliminated mass starvation from the famine process in India. Famine relief systems in other countries, particularly in Africa, need to take a critical look at the ability of victims to make claims upon their government in times of stress. As modern governments replace local political structures and impose taxes and national agricultural policies, they often, by default, destroy the local system of claims that formerly acted as a support in times of stress. Famine relief policies should encourage the modern state to take a critical look at its obligations to the vulnerable in such times.

If we extend this thinking from disaster relief back into disaster prevention and preparedness, then

prevention becomes more than a civil engineering exercise and preparedness has to go beyond the stockpiling of relief goods.

The vast majority of disaster victims are poor. The vast majority have little access to adequate health care or clean water. Most have little say in their country's political life and receive little benefit from its development schemes.

Disaster prevention programmes, like development programmes, have to recognise the root causes of poverty.

Identifying capacities to cope with threats and reduce vulnerabilities

In recognising and addressing the root causes of vulnerability, aid agencies must learn to build upon the innate capacities of local people and communities.

For many communities, mitigation of everyday risks is a permanent activity and an integral part of their survival strategy. In some situations there is perhaps more space for adjustment or adaptation to hazards and their impacts than we recognise. It is this fine balance between vulnerabilities and capacities which ultimately defines who is at more risk and who tips over the edge when the disaster strikes. In many ways vulnerabilities and capacities are mirror images of each other. A certain weakness can be turned into a strength through programmes and activities aimed at enhancing capacities at all levels; the individual, the household, the community.

Capacities can be divided into three classes:

- **Economic /Material:** People with economic and material resources can survive better. These may come in the form of land, tools, food, jobs, energy sources or access to credit and borrowing capacity. The abundance and appropriateness of people's resources make a big difference in whether they can handle and control any kind of threat. For example, people with access to food and clean water have better health to withstand disease; those with the means can afford materials to make their homes strong against cyclones.
- **Social/Organizational:** People have other resources that help them cope with, resist and handle the threats they may face. For example, communities that are close-knit and have social networks to support each other; where good leadership, caring local and national institutions are in place; where people share the physical resources they have in times of need. These communities may be economically poor but still they can be strong. Social and organisational capacities can be just as important (and sometimes more important) as material or economic capacities in helping people achieve development.
- **Attitudinal/Motivational/Psychological:** People also have capacities in terms of the ways they feel about their ability to cope. When people are dependent on others and feel victimised by events outside their control, they have few attitudinal or psychological capacities. They are more vulnerable to threats. When they feel strong, capable and powerful, they are less vulnerable. Sometimes, people gain motivational capacities through positive experiences of organising for some goal and working effectively to achieve it. High levels of awareness of risks can change attitudes towards safety. Thus, these capacities are often closely related to the capacities in the social/organizational realm.

Conclusion

Today, with our understanding of the causes of disaster vulnerability and their close relation to the issue of basic human rights, we have no excuse for treating only the symptoms and effects of disaster. Disaster response agencies have to start addressing such issues as why people are forced to live in high-risk areas such as Bangladesh's low-lying delta front, and why it is that some families or communities are consistently unable to obtain equitable access to government services. And in addressing these issues they have to learn how to provide aid which builds upon local people's capacities rather than creating further vulnerability through dependence upon external aid.

[A fuller analysis of vulnerability and disaster response can be found in the new Federation publication, the World Disasters Report. This analytical reference text will be published each year by the Federation and is available through most book sellers.

The World Disasters Report, 1993.

The Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

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